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Beyond the Spectacle: Decoding Queer–Caste Aesthetics in the Cinematic Archive of the Tamil Cinema

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Abstract

In the contemporary visual cultures of the Global South, particularly within Tamil cinema emerging from caste oppressed geographies, film operates as a critical site where queerness and caste are articulated through complex visual, sonic, and spatial vocabularies. These representations mobilize gestures of resistance through language, sound, embodiment, and affect, not as explicit declarations but as encoded signs legible primarily to those attuned to their cultural and political registers. Yet cinematic meaning is never fixed. Audiences actively interpret, negotiate, or reject these signs according to caste location, political literacy, and cultural capital. As Stuart Hall's work on decoding suggests, radical motifs circulating within mass culture remain vulnerable to containment, where anti caste and queer expressions risk being absorbed as aesthetic novelty rather than engaged as political critique. Queer pain, ecstatic embodiment, and alternative imaginaries of kinship are frequently misread by dominant caste viewers as symbolic excess or emotional release, while for caste oppressed queer audiences these same elements function as forms of archival survival and affirmation. By foregrounding how reception may be reoriented through community based screenings, alternative circuits of circulation, and pedagogical interventions, this discussion insists that aesthetics function as affective grammars through which dispossessed bodies claim space, history, and futurity. When queerness and caste converge onscreen, cinematic legibility itself is disrupted, directing attention not only to what is visible but to what remains withheld, refracted, or silenced.

Keywords: *Queer–Caste Aesthetics; Tamil Cinema; Encoding and Decoding; Aesthetic Politics; Critical Spectatorship*

Introduction – Beyond the Spectacle: Queer–Caste Readings of Tamil Cinema

In the fractured modernities of South India, cinema has always served as both a mirror and a mediator of social imagination. Tamil cinema operates as a battleground where caste hierarchies, gendered moralities, and regional identities are performed, negotiated, and often naturalized. Within this cinematic terrain, queerness emerges as a complex code, sometimes visible, often submerged, intertwined with the invisible yet omnipresent architecture of caste. The visual lexicon of Tamil cinema, shaped by decades of Dravidian populism and upper-caste authorship, has long oscillated between spectacle and subversion. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) shows that images gain meaning through interpretive circuits shaped by social location. In Tamil cinema, caste structures those circuits deciding who produces and consumes film and how queerness is seen or erased.

Historically, Tamil cinema positioned itself as the cultural arm of Dravidian rationalism and social justice. Yet its so-called radicalism was uneven, often limited to a critique of Brahminism while leaving

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untouched the deeper structures of caste within non-Brahmin society. The erasure of Dalit subjectivities and queer identities from these films reveals the limits of such populist politics. Dravidian heroes constructed through hypermasculine, heteronormative figures became visual embodiments of a sanitized modernity, where desire was permitted only in its heterosexual, reproductive form. Queer bodies, when they appeared, were rendered laughable, grotesque, or demonic. These early codes persist in the visual memory of Tamil cinema: from cross-dressed comedians to villainous trans women, the queer figure was deployed as a symbolic disturbance that reaffirmed, rather than destabilized, hetero-caste order.

What makes decoding this urgent is that Tamil cinema continues to carry within it these sediments of representational violence. In films celebrated as progressive, queer and caste-marked figures are still subordinated within narrative hierarchies. Consider Paava Kadhaigal (2020), where "Thangam" one of the anthology's central stories, navigates the relationship between queerness, caste, and religion. The gay protagonist's body becomes a vessel through which anxieties of purity, sin, and social deviance are projected. The story situates him below the hierarchies of both caste and religion, reducing his love to a tragic impossibility. As Hall (1990) observed, representation is not merely a reflection of identity but a site where power is exercised through framing, repetition, and omission. The frame of tragedy here serves to domesticate queerness, turning a political existence into an aesthetic spectacle of victimhood.

Queer Visibility, Containment, and the Politics of Acceptance in Tamil Cinema

Across contemporary Tamil cinema, queer representation emerges not as a linear progression from invisibility to liberation, but as a fractured terrain marked by conditional acceptance, moral pedagogy, and narrative containment. Films such as Super Deluxe (2019), Paava Kadhaigal (2020), Peranbu (2018), En Magan Magizhvan (2018), Goa (2010), Natchathiram Nagargiradhu (2022), and Kaadhal Enbadhu Podhu Udamai (2025) collectively reveal how queerness is rendered visible through affect, suffering, and familial negotiation rather than through structural critique. These films invite sympathy, yet often stop short of unsettling the caste and moral frameworks that govern spectatorship.

In Super Deluxe, Shilpa's return to the family stages trans existence within the intimate space of domestic reconciliation. While the film powerfully visualizes everyday humiliation and public ridicule faced by trans women, queerness is ultimately mediated through innocence and sentiment, particularly via the child's unconditional acceptance. This framing shifts responsibility away from social structures toward individual morality, enabling dominant audiences to consume trans suffering as humanist spectacle rather than as a demand for political accountability. A similar logic operates in Peranbu, where the trans woman Kalpana is rendered through affective excess and vulnerability, eliciting empathy while remaining peripheral to questions of caste, labour, and material survival.

Paava Kadhaigal, especially the segment "Thangam" deepens this paradox by foregrounding the intersection of queerness, religion, and caste. Sathaar's queer Muslim identity is positioned at the threshold of social legitimacy, where love is made narratively impossible through honour, purity, and collective violence. Tragedy becomes the dominant aesthetic mode through which queer existence is made intelligible. Rather than challenging the structures that produce such violence, the film stabilizes them by translating queer life into moral sacrifice. In contrast, En Magan Magizhvan gestures toward familial acceptance of homosexuality, yet frames queerness primarily as a private struggle resolved through parental recognition, leaving intact the broader heteronormative and caste coded social order.

Earlier representations, such as Goa, reveal how queerness was historically accommodated through humor and caricature. The gay couple appears as comic relief, reinforcing the idea that queer presence is tolerable only when stripped of desire, dignity, or political threat. This legacy of ridicule continues to shape audience decoding, where laughter becomes a disciplinary response to gender nonconformity. Against this backdrop, Natchathiram Nagargiradhu marks a significant rupture. By situating queerness within theatre, collective debate, and anti caste politics, the film resists privatization and instead frames desire as public

speech. Queerness here is not an identity to be accepted but a politics to be negotiated, learned, and performed.

Kaadhal Enbadhu Podhu Udamai extends this shift by centering lesbian desire and parental conflict, exposing how acceptance itself is structured through power. Love is articulated as common, yet its legitimacy remains contingent on social approval. Taken together, these films reveal that Tamil cinema often permits queer visibility only when it is rendered harmless through tragedy, innocence, humor, or familial sentiment. Moments of resistance do exist, but they are fragile and easily misread. Decoding these films through a queer caste lens thus reveals not simply representation, but the conditions under which queerness is allowed to appear, feel, and survive on screen.

The Architecture of the Frame: Space, Morality, and the Coded Body

The politics of representation in Tamil cinema cannot be understood without attending to the spatial architecture of the frame. Every film encodes geography as ideology. Homes, temples, factories, and street corners are not neutral backdrops but symbolic zones through which caste and queerness are both expressed and disciplined. The camera, in this sense, performs cartography: it decides who is at the centre, who remains in the shadows, and which spaces become permissible sites of desire. In the long genealogy of Tamil cinema, upper-caste heterosexuality has enjoyed aesthetic intimacy, its love stories unfold in private interiors, bedrooms, and scenic hills, sheltered from the chaos of public life. Queer and Dalit figures, by contrast, are often spatially displaced, confined to streets, salons, or slums, spaces of noise, exposure, and impermanence. The visual segregation of desire mirrors the geography of caste itself. To decode such imagery is to realize that exclusion operates not only through narrative but through the very texture of space, light, and sound.

As K. Gorringe and K. Damodaran (2017) argue in their study of "Madurai formula films," Tamil cinema's politics of space is deeply caste-coded. Temples and ancestral homes mark purity, while roadside stalls or rented rooms signal contamination. When queer or trans characters appear in such spaces, they inherit the stigma attached to them. Even sympathetic portrayals like the fleeting tenderness between two men or the dignity of a trans woman are spatially marked as deviations from the "centre." These bodies are shown moving through thresholds, corridors, and margins, rarely granted the stillness or privacy of belonging. The camera's geography thus doubles as moral geography. Appadurai's (1996) notion of locality as a "relational achievement" is crucial here: the locality in Tamil cinema is always achieved through the exclusion of certain bodies from its moral landscape.

Reading queer–caste cinema spatially opens new interpretive possibilities. It reveals how visibility is not freedom when it is bound to containment. A Dalit queer presence in the frame does not guarantee equality if that presence is always located outside domestic respectability or divine legitimacy. Space becomes the first level of encoding, determining what kinds of intimacy the audience is allowed to see. The act of decoding, therefore, must attend not only to what is represented but to where it unfolds to the geographies of privilege that structure cinematic realism itself.

Yet, beyond spatial segregation lies another subtle mechanism of containment. The politics of empathy. Tamil cinema, even when liberal, often organizes queerness as a spectacle of suffering designed to provoke feeling rather than action. The audience is invited to empathize, to momentarily "feel for" the queer or caste-oppressed subject, but such empathy operates within the safe distance of consumption. It becomes what Nancy Fraser (2000) would describe as "misrecognition" a form of affective inclusion that leaves structural hierarchies intact.

This regime of empathy is central to the liberal decoding of films like Paava Kadhaigal. Viewers experience the queer character's humiliation as pathos, not as politics. The affective labour of pity substitutes for political literacy. In this sense, empathy functions as a cinematic anesthetic, it soothes the conscience of the dominant-caste spectator while displacing the urgency of resistance. Stuart Hall (1980)

cautioned against precisely this form of decoding, where oppositional texts are reabsorbed into dominant readings through affective consensus. To "understand" becomes to neutralize.

Queer–caste spectatorship demands a different ethics, one that transforms empathy into accountability. Sara Ahmed's idea of "affective economies" is helpful here: emotions circulate not as private feelings but as public relations of power. When Savarna audiences shed tears for queer tragedy yet continue to resist Dalit or trans assertion off-screen, their emotion consolidates their position as benevolent interpreters. By contrast, for queer and caste-oppressed viewers, the same scenes evoke not pity but recognition, an emotional archive of lived experience. The dissonance between these two audiences exposes how social location of caste mediates affective access.

To decode ethically, then, is to refuse the comfort of empathy and embrace what Rancière (2004) calls "the distribution of the sensible" to feel differently, without mastery. Films that centre queer–Dalit subjects ask not for sympathy but for reparation of vision: to see without appropriating, to listen without translating pain into moral triumph. Only then can empathy move from sentiment to solidarity.

Reading Resistance: Decoding, Misreading, and the Queer–Caste Viewer

Caste complicates this further. The queerness portrayed in mainstream Tamil cinema often assumes an urban, upper-caste, English-speaking subjectivity—a sanitized queerness detached from the material conditions of caste and labour. The erotic or emotional autonomy of such characters stands in sharp contrast to the silenced realities of Dalit and Bahujan queer lives, whose visibility remains contingent on upper-caste mediation. When queerness is aestheticized through Savarna sensibilities, it is stripped of its radical charge. Fraser's (2000) critique of "recognition without redistribution" is apt here: cinematic representation without structural transformation reproduces privilege under the guise of inclusion.

At the same time, certain films encode moments of rupture that resist these dominant readings. The misrecognition of these moments reveals what Hall (1980) called the "dominant-hegemonic code," where the viewer's decoding aligns with the encoded ideology, and the "negotiated" or "oppositional" readings, where viewers reinterpret the message from their own social standpoint. In the context of Tamil cinema, Dalit and queer viewers often occupy the oppositional position, deciphering layered meanings that elude dominant-caste spectators. What appears as humor to one audience may register as humiliation to another. The recurring comic trope of the effeminate man, for instance, functions as caste-coded violence. When a queer body is turned into a joke in films like referring a gay with "Avana Nee" or the "trans villain" motif in I (2015), the laughter becomes an instrument of caste-patriarchal discipline, reminding viewers where queerness must belong, on the periphery of ridicule.

This visual economy of ridicule and erasure mirrors what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls "the distribution of the sensible", the invisible structure that determines what can be seen, said, and felt within a culture. Tamil cinema's aesthetic order historically excluded queer–caste subjectivities from the realm of intelligibility. Their stories existed, but not within the grammar of respectability or realism. Instead, they were folded into what Deleuze (1986) would describe as the "time-image", moments of affective disruption that escape narrative containment. The queer figure lingers in fragments: a look, a gesture, a voice, signifiers that resist closure and gesture toward a politics of refusal.

To decode such refusal requires a sensitivity to what Appadurai (1996) terms the "ideoscapes" of global modernity, the flows of ideas, identities, and aesthetics that cross local and transnational boundaries. Tamil cinema's engagement with queerness cannot be read in isolation; it is situated within global circuits of visibility, where the language of pride and progress often clashes with the lived realities of caste-based exclusion. The rainbow flag flies high in Chennai's pride parades, yet within film industries and queer spaces alike, caste continues to structure participation, leadership, and narrative centrality. The politics of who gets to represent queerness remains tied to who holds social capital, what Bourdieu (1986) identified as the material and symbolic resources that govern access to legitimacy.

The question, then, is not whether Tamil cinema has queer representation, but how that representation is read and circulated. Who interprets queerness, and through which lens? The very act of decoding becomes political when the viewer's social position determines what meanings are accessible or admissible. Dominant-caste audiences, equipped with cultural privilege, often decode queer films through universalist empathy, appreciating them for their "progressive message" without recognizing the caste-specific exclusions embedded within. For caste-oppressed queer audiences, however, decoding is an act of survival, a process of reassembling fragments of representation into archives of identification. The gap between these readings is not a matter of taste but of power.

Aesthetics as Insurgency: Collectives, Pedagogies, and Reclaiming the Frame

In recent years, a shift has begun from token inclusion to aesthetic intervention. Caste-oppressed artists and collectives have begun to reclaim the camera as a weapon of narration. Pa. Ranjith's Casteless Collective has widened the discursive field. Not explicitly queer in lyric, the Collective's anti-caste performances such as rap, gaana, protest music create sonic archives of solidarity. In working-class neighbourhoods and pride marches these performances teach audiences to read sound as politics, reminding us that decoding extends beyond the visual.

Such interventions foreground Rancière's (2004) "aesthetic politics", the act of redistributing visibility and perception. The Casteless Collective's engagement with cinema, through collaborations and public performances, has begun to re-educate audiences on how to read representation beyond the liberal optics of diversity. Their presence in film discussions, workshops, and street performances exemplifies Mignolo's (2009) "epistemic disobedience": a refusal to interpret through colonial or Savarna frameworks of knowledge. When viewers participate in these spaces, they learn to decode not only what the image shows but what the image hides, the labour, caste histories, and embodied struggles that underlie cinematic production.

As global streaming platforms and festival circuits increasingly curate "diverse" South Indian cinema, the risk of depoliticization intensifies. Films that touch upon caste or queerness are often celebrated for their visual daring while their political content is subdued for cosmopolitan consumption. Menon and Taha's (2024) discussion of southern aesthetics aptly notes how the Global South's cinema is marketed as exotic difference within global circuits of recognition. This circulation converts subaltern expression into aesthetic currency, erasing the local contexts of oppression that give these films their urgency. To resist this, local film collectives, campus screenings, and regional pride events have become crucial spaces for what Hall (1993) called "popular cultural pedagogy" informal yet transformative modes of critical learning.

Community screenings organized by Dalit and queer collectives across Chennai, Madurai, and Coimbatore have created new public interpretations. These spaces foreground discussion over consumption, decoding over applause. Audiences are encouraged to question not only what the film says but who it allows to speak. Here, decoding becomes an act of solidarity, transforming spectatorship into shared pedagogy. This movement parallels what Fraser (2000) envisioned as "participatory parity," a reorganization of recognition through active, collective meaning-making. When queer Dalit filmmakers and audiences interpret together, they generate epistemic justice, repairing the "epistemic violence" of Savarna misreading.

Decoding queer–caste cinema demands a new pedagogy, one that trains the senses to perceive differences ethically. Teaching queer-caste aesthetics trains the politics of attention: how to look, listen, and linger with discomfort. Film schools and festivals must develop "onscreen/offscreen" awareness (Nakassis, 2023) and unpack how cultural capital shapes decoding (Bourdieu, 1986; Hall, 1997).

Reading beyond the spectacle requires slowing down, refusing closure, and embracing the opacity of subaltern expression. As Deleuze (1986) suggested, cinema's power lies not in narrative coherence but in its capacity to make time visible, to hold contradictions, pauses, and repetitions that challenge linear understanding. Queer–caste cinema thrives in these temporal cracks. Its characters often exist in suspension neither victims nor heroes, but witnesses to the unfinished project of liberation. The queer Dalit figure in

Tamil cinema may not always speak, but their silence is not emptiness. It invites the audience to listen differently.

This reorientation of spectatorship also demands a shift in cultural infrastructure. Alternative circuits such as Dalit Film and Cultural Festivals, Urban Lens, and independent film collectives in Tamil Nadu offer models for how cinema can be democratized. These spaces reject neoliberal metrics of success, awards, box office, global acclaim and instead ask: who was moved, who was seen, who was heard? As Hall (1980) wrote, meaning is always a practice, never a guarantee. To preserve the insurgent potential of queer–caste aesthetics, cinema must remain open-ended, unresolved, uneasy, alive.

In this light, aesthetics itself becomes insurgency. Style is no longer surface; it is substance. The fragmented narratives, oscillating tones, and abrupt shifts in mood that mark films engaging with caste and queerness are not flaws but forms of resistance. They mirror the fractured experience of living at the intersections of multiple oppressions. As Appadurai (1996) noted, modernity in the Global South is lived not as linear progress but as a negotiation between violence and aspiration. Tamil queer–caste cinema embodies this tension, offering neither utopia nor despair, but a stubborn persistence and the refusal to vanish.

Conclusion

The future of such cinema depends on our capacity to read it ethically. To decode beyond the spectacle is to move from consumption to engagement, from empathy to accountability. It requires the dominant viewer to confront their positionality, to unlearn comfort, and to practice Mignolo's (2009) decolonial freedom, the freedom to think, feel, and interpret otherwise. It demands that critics, educators, and audiences cease to ask whether queerness or caste is "represented" and instead ask how these representations redistribute power.

Tamil cinema stands today at a critical juncture. The proliferation of independent filmmakers, digital platforms, and collectives like the Casteless Collective marks the beginning of a new visual ethics, one that resists both spectacle and silence. Yet this shift will only sustain if the act of decoding becomes communal, if meaning is built not through elite consensus but through shared struggle. Pride marches, street performances, and film discussions across the state have already begun this re-education of the eye, reclaiming pleasure and politics as intertwined practices.

To look beyond the spectacle is to look again, deeper and more responsibly. Queer–caste aesthetics do not provide answers; they pose questions that unsettle claims of progress. Cinema, like society, remains an unfinished struggle: every frame bears traces of exclusion, every silence a possibility of speech. Criticism must therefore be ongoing and collective—decoding as an act of justice.

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